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# Examining Millennial Characterizations as Guidance for Choosing Classroom Strategy Changes

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Millennial students, Learning expectations, Teaching tactics

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### **Abstract**

This project reports exploration of the expectations of the students in my large public Midwestern university about learning processes and their teachers. Its objective was to help ground my own reflections on whether and how the pedagogical changes proposed to accommodate the Millennial generation are appropriate for my students and for me. Data were gathered through a survey ( $n = 204$ ) based on the literature and specifically focusing on claims made about the Millennial generational group. I then sought to identify additional issues and to hear the students' own reflections on teaching and learning through three focus groups. Results indicated that some student responses to items reflecting generational characterizations were consistent with stereotypical claims, but some were not. This paper then presents my reflection about how results inform how I might proceed as I seek to support learning in my students.

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### **Introduction**

Inundated by stories in the popular and academic press about the learning needs of contemporary college students, many student-centered instructors are working to change their teaching strategies and methods. They are responding to arguments that the characteristics of Millennial students are different enough from previous generations that successfully teaching them requires revising pedagogies and tools: extensive use of digital technology, team learning, short blocks of information presentation, integrated games, music and video, and very specific, step-by-step instructions for assignments. This urgency for change is heightened by pressures on higher education. Colleges and universities must respond to reduced funding, criticisms about rising costs and claims of poor cost-effectiveness, a shift of emphasis from arts and humanities to science and technology, increased anti-intellectualism, and questions about the value and mission of higher education. Students, and their parents, increasingly are characterized as consumers who have the right to define what their educations should be like and that they want technology and other changed practices in the classroom. The result for many faculty members is pressure to use every possible new tool to meet these conditions.

While I find many of the arguments about this generation of college students compelling and consistent with my own experience, I have struggled with how I should respond. How can I select tactics that are consistent with my teaching and learning philosophy, with my subject material, and, importantly, with the needs of my own students? How much time

and energy should I commit to changing my teaching tactics? Changes, however appropriate, must inevitably take time away from my other professorial responsibilities, and the pressures there have increased, not abated, in response to the challenges my own university faces.

To help me formulate my own response, then, I sought to better understand my own students. This project sought to explore the expectations of students in my large public Midwestern university about learning processes and about their teachers. I began with a survey based on the literature and specifically focusing on claims made about the Millennial generational group. Then, to identify additional issues and to hear the students' own reflections on teaching and learning, I conducted three focus groups. This paper reports on that project and then reflects about what it tells me and how I might proceed as I seek to support learning in my students.

## **Literature Review**

### **Millennial Students**

Most articles in the press group the 15.6 million undergraduate students in college (U.S. Department of Education, 2007) with members of the Millennial generation. The term Millennial has come to describe individuals born between about 1982 and 2000 (Hoover, 2009; Howe & Strauss, 2000), although the dates vary. Smola and Sutton (2002), for example, set the dates as 1979 and 1994. Although this group represents some 80 million individuals (with that number growing due to immigration) (Coomies, 2004), many authors treat the group as a single homogeneous entity. Neil Howe and William Strauss in 2000 assigned seven "core traits" to the group. Millennials are, Howe and Strauss argued, special, sheltered, confident, team-oriented, conventional, pressured and achieving. This argument clearly caught the imagination of marketers, teachers and administrators in higher education, and authors in the popular press (e.g. Pew, 2007; Gaudelli, 2009; Rampell, 2011; Samuelson, 2010), the popular literature (e.g. Alsop, 2008; Strauss & Howe, 2007; Tapscott, 2009; Twenge, 2006; Winograd & Hais, 2011) and empirical studies (e.g. Greenberger, Lessard, Chen & Farruggia, 2008; Ng, Schweitzer & Lyons, 2010; Smola & Sutton, 2002).

The difference in these sources and their characterizations of Millennials is salient. As Myers and Sadaghiani (2010, footnote, p. 226) have noted, the popular press is primarily entertainment-focused, attracting attention by making interesting or surprising claims and offering advice, often based solely on the author's experience or opinion. Popular literature includes books and articles written for trade audiences, basing their claims on secondary research. Since these sources generally are not written by trained researchers and are frequently based on commercial surveys, Myers and Sadaghiani argue that their claims may be suspect. Data-driven and peer-reviewed empirical studies are unhappily the most rare of the group.

A great many authors concerned with student learning have made arguments based on these characterizations, even though the Howe and Strauss's (2000) claims were derived from a sample of about 600 affluent white students in suburban Virginia (Hoover, 2009). Concern has been raised that the sweeping generalizations made about Millennials are suspect, since the labels do not apply equally to young people who are minorities, poor, or from big cities or small rural towns (Bonner, Marbley & Howard, 2010). Complicating this is

the actual heterogeneity of college students. According to a report by the Art & Science Group and the College Board, almost half of today's students do not think of themselves as "millennial students" (in Hoover, 2007). Oblinger and Hawkins (2005) note that about three-quarters of college and university students today are nontraditional. Included in this group are those who have delayed enrollment into college, attend part-time, work full-time, are financially independent, have dependents, or are single parents.

Claims grouping all Millennials have been strongly critiqued for being based on convenience samples and for having very small effect sizes demonstrating more variability within generations than differences across generations (Trzesniewski & Donnellan, 2010). It is reasonable to posit additional differences based on class level and/or age and/or life stage, class subject and student experience with it, among other variables. Nevertheless, generalizations based on Howe and Strauss's characterizations have inspired many proposals for changes in teaching methods. Some of these are discussed below.

*Millennials as special and sheltered.* Drawing on Howe and Strauss's arguments that Millennials are special and sheltered, as well as other literature (and their own experiences with contemporary college students), some observers have proposed that instructors should heighten their efforts to establish personal relationships with students, be available electronically, and give prompt extensive and detailed feedback (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Hanson, Drumheller, Mallard, McKee & Schlegel, 2011). *The National Survey of Student Engagement* (NSSE) (2011) indicated that in general, students are engaged by interaction with faculty, with 83% of responding seniors indicating they had had a conversation with a faculty member or advisor about their work plans. Murray (1997, p. 28) argues that Millennials expect faculty "to display authoritative expertise, model effective techniques, stress motivation, invest in their outcomes, celebrate their victories."

Students of varying generations, in response to the prompt "if higher education listened to me..." also raised issues of faculty connection with students. They proposed the university be more like a community, "like it's connected to me" (Aviles, Phillips, Rosenblatt & Vargas (2005). This comment of connection to the students themselves reflects the argument made by Twenge (2006) that this group of young people, what she calls Generation Me, is more narcissistic than previous generations, more "special" and entitled.

Also consistent with these claims that they have been sheltered and feel special, students report high reliance on consistent feedback and response (Rainie, 2012). Seventy percent of students responding to the NSSE (2011) reported they frequently sought help when they did not understand course material. According to the generational characterization, this is because they have had positive feedback and self-esteem messages all their lives (Alsop, 2008). Sweeney (2006) argues that their parents consistently told them they would succeed at whatever they did and have high expectations of them. They are pressured, therefore, to live up to these messages.

*Millennials as confident.* In response to the argument that Millennials are confident, observers draw on two related claims. First, students are optimistic about their futures, predicting strong academic performance (Sax, 2003) and well-paying jobs focused on their individual needs and interests (CareerRookie, 2007; Ng, Schweitzer & Lyons, 2010). Second, some of their optimism arguably reflects the level of connection and support they perceive from their families (Galsky & Shotick, 2012). According to Strauss and Howe

(2000) and their followers, lifetimes of attention and planning by parents have resulted in a feeling of safety and a sense of confidence in students.

*Millennials as team-oriented.* Based on the characterization of Millennials as dominantly focused on their groups of friends and eager for collaborative work (Howe & Strauss, 2000; Roehling, Kooi, Dykema, Quisenberry & Vandlen, 2011; Twenge, 2006; Wilson & Gerber, 2008), educators have proposed expanding the use of group work that focuses on interaction and connectedness (Hanson et al.; McGlynn, 2005). Millennials are described as used to working in groups and teams, "In contrast to the lone ranger attitude of earlier generations, Millennials actually believe a team can accomplish more and better – they've experienced team success" (Heathfield, n.d.).

*Millennials as pressured.* Although the support many Millennials have had and continue to have from their families has given them a sense of being valued, this same parental connection arguably has created pressure on students to live up to their parents' expectations and investment in them. Further, given the rising expense of college and the general economic situation, more students than ever are working part-time or even full-time. The American Association of University Professors (Perna, 2010) reported National Center for Education Statistics findings that in 2007 nearly half of full-time traditional-age college students and 80% of undergraduates attending college part-time worked while enrolled. A study by NSSE (2009) found that, consistent with the conventional wisdom, working more than 20 hours a week has a negative effect on student grades. Many of even those students who do not work report being stressed, according to MSNBC (2008).

*Millennials as digital natives.* Although claims about Millennials as being expert users of technology do not come from Howe and Strauss (2000), a great many writers have argued that, given students interest in and extensive use of cell phones, MP3 players, laptop computers, YouTube and Facebook, faculty should incorporate these and other technologies into their classrooms (Daniel, 1996; Dzuiban, Moskal & Hartman, 2005; Godwin-Jones, 2005; McGlynn, 2005; Lippencott, 2010; Prensky, Roblyer, 2006; Lowery, Wingard, 2004;). For example, in the ETC Journal, Shimabukuro (2011) says of Millennials,

"they're fully geared to learn independently whenever they want and wherever they are. The idea of a one-size-fits-all, time-and-place-bound, face-to-face training program in a classroom simply doesn't make sense to them. They want the answers they need when they want it, regardless of location. And they have the technology that nurtures this preference."

McHaney and Daniel (2011) argue that educators must reconsider their learning theories, pedagogies, and practices and modify their interactions with students. Beyond arguing for integration of technologies in new ways, these authors call for a complete rethinking of teaching to meet changing needs. Among the proposals for new or expanded technology use are blended classes, where 25-50% of class time is replaced with Web components (Dzuiban, et al. 2005). Benefits claimed here are increased interaction and heightened accessibility, as well as support for students who need repetition or review without taking time away from those who might not need the extra reinforcement (Wingard, 2004). Prensky (2005) argues for more than even putting the curriculum online, that game-based learning should be the new foundation for pedagogy, since students have been playing online games since they were small children.

In contrast, some observers argue that just as other distinctive characteristics of Millennials may not generalize, use of technology, especially computer-mediated social communication such as Facebook or texting) may not generalize to the ability to deal effectively in face-to-face groups comprised of people that students do not already know (Reuman, 2011).

*Millennials as consumers.* Underlying many of the proposals for changes in teaching strategies is an increasingly publicized perspective that students (and their parents) are – or at least think they should be – consumers. As Carlson (2005) put it, Millennials need to be able to choose “what kind of education they buy, and what, where and how they learn” (p. A34). Students are described as seeing their educations as another acquisition to purchase rather than as a learning process (McGlynn, 2008) and as expecting a much greater array of product and service selectivity (Sweeney, 2006). Drawing on concepts from youth marketers, Geraci (2005) wrote (p. 24), “They are used to making their own consumer choices.” This perspective informs both some students’ attitudes about the value of assignments and classes but also their use of time, since they arguably see their time as monetarily valuable.

### **Positioning Myself in the Argument**

Many of the proposals made about how teachers should modify their teaching tactics to best attract, touch, and influence Millennials are appealing. Many are intuitively attractive, and many sound like fun. However, I approached this array of teaching strategies with trepidation, with significant concern. First, I was concerned that I would not be able to implement some of these approaches in a credible way. I am an early Baby Boomer, and I am not well-connected to millennial cultural touchstones. Indeed, I am hardly connected at all, as some hilarious interactions in my classes demonstrate. Would integrating music, video and films, games and such be credible? Further, would these media help inform the material I teach, even if they did hold student attention? How could I use them to help prepare students for life after university?

Indeed, there are significant questions about whether it is appropriate to assume that these tactics would be as effective or valuable in my context as in those their advocates describe. One of the strongest and most widely publicized advocates of using technology in the classroom has rethought his approach and now argues that the most important pedagogical objective is to connect students and teachers, whether or not technology is foregrounded (Young, 2012). Finally, one another reality that applies to me is that once we have developed an effective teaching approach, it is difficult to make a transition to other methodologies (Hsu & Wang, 2011).

Added to these concerns is my interest in the debates about the purpose of higher education. There is evident pressure on colleges and universities to focus much more on specifically preparing students for jobs and less on developing a broader sense of the world and themselves in it through wide-ranging explorations of the arts and sciences (cf. Baum & McPherson, 2012). This change of focus is evident in my university as well, so it seems appropriate to wonder how the changes I consider may support students, my university, and higher education as a whole.

Based on the literature and informed by my felt need to understand my own students better so I can determine what teaching strategy changes are appropriate for them and for me, therefore, the following research questions were posed:

RQ1: How consistent are responses from this sample of college students with characterizations of Millennials in the popular press and popular literature?

RQ2: What expectations does this sample report about learning processes?

RQ3: What expectations of teachers does this sample of college students identify?

RQ4: What does this tell me about how I might respond to the expectations that students in this sample report?

## Methods

To explore the expectations of teaching and learning of students in my university, I first created a survey drawing on the claims and characterizations of Millennials in the literature, and particularly Howe and Strauss's (2000) claims, since they appear in so many news stories, books, and academic articles. Specifically, I developed five-point Likert-style items focusing on claims that Millennials are special and sheltered, confident and team-oriented, conventional in the sense of wanting to know expectations, and subject to competing pressures from work and parental expectations. In addition, I developed items about their learning expectations – what kind of classroom interaction they think appropriate, the role in the classroom they see for technology, how teachers should interact with them, and what they think should be expected of them as students.

## Participants

A total of 204 students enrolled in the university's basic speech communication class completed the survey and received research credit for doing so. The basic course is required for most undergraduate students, so this sample represented a wide variety of majors. The mean age of the students completing the survey was 19.67, of whom 66% were female, 47% were sophomores (with 28.9% freshmen, 13.7% juniors, and 10.3% seniors), and 81.3% were Caucasian (with 7.9% Asian, 3.4% African-American, 2.0% Hispanic, and 2.5% Native American). Although a larger percentage of students in this survey reported they had worked for pay during the last year (48.3%), 31% reported that they currently have one job for pay and 6.9% that they have two current jobs for pay. Average number of hours worked per week was 14.5.

I also conducted three focus groups, with a total of 30 students drawn from the same basic speech communication course pool. In this group, mean age was 20.2, 60% were female, 46.7% were sophomores (with 16.7% freshmen, 23.3% juniors, and 13.3% seniors), and 73.3% were Caucasian (with 10% Asian, one percent each African-American, Hispanic, and Native American, and 6.7% reporting mixed race). In this group, 43.3% reported having one current job for pay. Using the same interview protocol for all the focus groups, I explored the questions of student expectations of teachers and of learning on which the survey focused.



## Results

The goal of this project was to better understand the expectations of students in my university about teaching and learning. To do this, I began by exploring the extent to which students in this sample described themselves consistently with characterizations of Millennials. Then I sought to identify student expectations of teachers and the learning environment to help me frame my efforts to identify new teaching strategies that met both student needs and my own. Since my intention was to understand the degree of agreement or disagreement students reported about the items, not to use inferential statistics, I report results as percentages, rather than means. In addition, because these items were not created to form subscales but rather to explore student responses to these claims, results reported here are those that stand out in informing my overall objective and answering the last research question. In this section, I integrate salient comments from the focus groups with the responses to the survey.

The first group of items sought to explore students' responses to items exploring claims made that Millennials are special, that is, that they deserve attention and rewards. As Table 1 indicates, at least half of responding students agreed or strongly agreed with statements that teachers should reward them for their efforts and be flexible to support their success. More than 85% agreed or strongly agreed that they will be rewarded for their learning efforts, as well as that teachers should be available to provide individual attention when they need it. Interestingly, more than half of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the item "It is ok to ask instructors for special treatment."

Comments from students in the focus groups were consistent with these results. Illustrative of the 85% of survey respondents who agreed or strongly agreed that they would be rewarded for their learning efforts, a sophomore in a focus group complained about a time when it did not turn out that way, reflecting a belief that she should be rewarded: "I did everything it asked for, but I didn't get an A." A colleague in the focus group agreed, "If you try and you work at it, and do everything they ask for, why is it a C?" Another voiced the belief that instructors should reward trying with credit, "You should get some points for improvement." Effort should matter, said another, also noting that "you really won't lose anything for asking." Responding to a question about teacher flexibility, a participant in one of the focus groups noted, "We want to go out and get jobs and be successful, and when teachers are unwilling to make adjustments, it is difficult."

Item	% strongly agreeing	% agreeing	Total % in agreement
My teacher should be available to provide individual attention should I need it.	33.5	52.5	86.0
I will be rewarded for my learning efforts.	40.8	44.3	85.1
My instructors should reward me for my efforts in class.	17.0	47.0	64.0
My teacher should be flexible to allow for my classroom success.	12.0	49.0	61.0
It is ok to ask instructors for special treatment.	15.5	38.5	54.0
I expect my instructors to give me credit for trying, regardless of how well I perform.	4.0	27.1	31.1

**Table 1.** Percentage of responses strongly agreeing or agreeing to items reflecting Millennials as special

Another claim made about Millennials is that they are conventional, that is, that they are concerned with understanding the rules and following them, in the expectation that doing so will be rewarded. Results from all the items addressing this claim showed respondents clearly in agreement that they should be given specific expectations and grading guidelines for their work and that classes should be very structured. A focus group member said, "I need something to be laid out. If it will be graded 1,2,3,4,5, give instructions 1,2,3,4,5." Not all students wanted specifics in assignments, however. One student advocated less direction, "We are here to learn or interpret something. Don't tell us what to do. I can think critically and grow myself." Another said, "I don't need another parent." Interestingly, a majority of respondents to the survey indicated that their instructors currently do provide clear criteria, although the total percentage of respondents in agreement here was not among the highest percentages.

Item	% strongly agreeing	% agreeing	Total % in agreement
My teacher should provide specific grading guidelines for each assignment	22.9	58.2	81.1
I am frustrated when my instructor doesn't tell me specifically what he or she wants in an assignment.	30.5	46.5	77.0
My instructor should clearly communicate all classroom rules.	26.0	61.5	87.5
I'd rather have step-by-step instructions for a project than be told to decide on my own how to accomplish it.	14.4	38.3	52.7
I prefer classes that are very structured.	19.4	45.8	65.2
I expect my instructors to provide study guides.	15.5	46.0	61.5
I expect the rules for proper classroom conduct to be relatively consistent from instructor to instructor.	9.1	58.6	67.7
My instructors provide clear criteria for good performance	12.4	52.7	65.1

**Table 2.** Percentage of responses strongly agreeing or agreeing to items reflecting Millennials as conventional

Millennials are also described as confident. Indeed, their responses to the questions directly addressing their sense of their own readiness for life after college were very positive. It is useful to note that the percentage agreeing was in many cases noticeably higher than the percentage of those responding "strongly agree" to this item.

Item	% strongly agreeing	% agreeing	Total % in agreement
I expect that, when I graduate from college, I will have the knowledge and skills I need to get a good job.	39.0	46.5	85.5
I am confident that my studies will prepare me well for a professional job	30.0	54.5	84.5
I am confident my studies have prepared me to be a well-informed citizen.	26.5	51.5	78.0
I am confident that my studies have prepared me for a long-term career.	28.1	47.7	75.8
I think my degree will be worth the money it cost.	28.0	37.0	65.0

**Table 3.** Percentage of responses strongly agreeing or agreeing to items reflecting Millennials as confident.

Howe and Strauss (2002) and many others have argued that Millennials are team-oriented. Responses to the items addressing teamwork and interaction with other students in classroom settings in this survey resulted in a mixed pattern. Although students in this sample reported liking to hear what others have to say, they did not evaluate group work as preferable to other kinds of classroom learning formats.

Some focus group members noted that full-class discussions are particularly useful, "If others don't understand, you can figure out more of the things you don't understand." Another issue key to group work is how grading is handled. A focus group respondent said when asked if he liked group work, "It depends on how it is graded, and I don't like working with ignorant people."

Item	% strongly agreeing	% agreeing	Total % in agreement
I prefer group work over all other teaching method.	2.5	21.7	24.2
I look forward to opportunities to work on class projects with my peers.	6.0	31.8	37.8
I like to hear what other students have to say about ideas in class.	22.4	60.7	83.1
I am comfortable calling on other students in my class for help.	6.0	45.8	51.8
I am comfortable with evaluation of my performance by my peers.	8.5	43.0	51.5

**Table 4.** Percentage of responses strongly agreeing or agreeing to items reflecting Millennials as team-oriented

Millennials frequently have been described as wanted children who have been protected and even coddled by their parents. Some parents of Millennials have been labeled as "helicopter parents" for their tendency to hover, helping students apply for college and for jobs, choose classes, deal with teachers and mediate problems with others. Parental attentiveness and parental expectations are included as contributing to the characterization of Millennials as pressured. Although results from this study indicate that students are not in college to please their parents or because their parents expect it, respondents do report perceptions that their parents have high expectations of their performance, both in classes and in

readily finding an initial job. Also interesting is the 63.2% of respondents who agree or strongly agree that they talk with a parent every day.

Another pressure on students is work. Thirty percent of the survey sample and 43% of the focus group respondents reported they have one job for pay. In the survey sample, another 7% reported having two jobs for pay.

Item	% strongly agreeing	% agreeing	Total % in agreement
I am in college because my parents expect it.	6.0	19.9	25.9
My parents expect me to earn at least a B in each class I take	24.4	38.8	63.2
I talk with my mom or dad every day.	16.0	60.5	46.5
I am at college to please my parents.	3.5	14.6	18.1
I can call on my family for help with my class work.	12.9	33.3	46.2
I am in college because I don't want to let my family down.	5.0	21.0	26.0
My parents expect me to excel in my classes because they have paved the way for my college successes	16.0	37.5	53.5
My parents expect me to get a good job directly out of college.	12.9	36.8	49.7

**Table 5.** Percentage of responses strongly agreeing or agreeing to items reflecting Millennials as pressured by parental expectations

A great many of the suggestions proposed for changes in teaching strategies revolve around use of technology. Although students in this sample reported that instructors should use technology in the classroom and claimed some ability to multi-task with technology, their responses to these particular items overall did not reflect a desire for a shift toward mediated instruction. Only a few focus group participants commented positively about technology in the classroom, and those comments were specifically about use of movie clips and music videos, "I like it when they show movie clips and relate it. That helps a lot."

Further, these students did not agree they should text or surf the web during class. Focus group comments were inconsistent. Some participants were against these actions: "I think it's just rude" and "You're spending a lot of money for that person's [the instructor's] thoughts," and "I think it is horrible. That person spent his whole life learning the subject. You should listen."

Other focus group participants argued in favor of texting in class, however. "As long as you are still taking notes, listening, it is okay for you to send texts," said one, and another agreed, "As long as it isn't disrupting your learning." A third participant was more emphatic, "Texts don't distract." Participants were less supportive of checking Facebook during class.

Item	% strongly agreeing	% agreeing	Total % in agreement
I prefer online discussions over classroom discussions	3.5	6.5	11.0
I text message during class	1.0	9.5	10.5
I learn more from videos or other media than from lectures.	1.5	22.0	23.5
Students should be allowed to surf the web or message others while in class	1.5	9.5	11.0
I have no problems doing several things at once, like studying, listening to music, and messaging with my friends	11.4	35.3	46.7
My instructors should use technology in the classroom.	12.9	56.7	69.6
I prefer lecture over any other teaching method	2.5	21.7	24.2
I learn more from the Internet than from classroom discussion.	1.5	13.5	15.0
I can still follow the class while I text or surf the web.	2.5	20.1	22.6

**Table 6.** Percentage of responses strongly agreeing or agreeing to items addressing student attitudes toward technology use in the classroom

Beyond exploring the extent to which students at my university reflect the characterizations of Millennials, this project sought to identify their expectations of classroom processes and of interaction with their teachers. The results that stand out from this group of items are those about expectations of feedback on student work. Nearly half of respondents said they were only interested in the grade on papers or exams. Forty-two percent agreed or strongly agreed with the item “The grade I get in class is all that matters.” Another compelling finding is that nearly 38% of students reported agreement or strong agreement with the item “I am generally reluctant to speak up when we have class activities.”

Although survey results showed that participants did not agree with items indicating that they should get a B just for attending lecture or for doing the reading, focus group participants expressed frustration that the efforts they expected would be successful were not always enough. One sophomore said, “I did everything I was asked for, but I didn’t get an A.” Another focus group participant said, “If teachers are going to assign material, it should pertain to the class. It’s not helpful if you don’t have to know it for the test. If it isn’t on the test, it isn’t important.” Focus group participants also were positive about involvement of instructors and development of relationships with them. Comments here included: “Review sessions are nice because it shows they are here to care about students and their grades.” “I like when they try to meet me half way, so I’m not just another name.” “I like it when teachers hold review sessions. They’re not just interested in a salary or a grant; they’re interested in me.” “When you get to the point where you feel like that person is your friend you do better. As I friend, I owe it to you to do good. If it were a boss, you rebel against them subconsciously, and it hurts you.”

Other compelling comments made the focus groups about the instructor’s job were that he or she “should present the information in a way that is easy to understand” and the best teachers are those who “try to make a point to try and ensure people understand the material.”

Item	% strongly agreeing	% agreeing	Total % in agreement
When my papers or exams are returned, all I'm interested in is the grade.	16.6	32.7	49.3
The grade I get in class is all that matters.	9.1	33.3	42.4
I prefer to cover just the material that is required for exams	8.0	39.0	47.0
I do not get enough detail in feedback from my instructors.	4.0	23.1	27.1
I expect to get a B in a class just for attending the lectures.	1.0	11.0	12.0
I expect to get a B in a class just for completing the required reading.	0.5	23.5	24.0
I find it hard to stay awake during class	11.4	17.9	29.3
I find it hard to pay attention in class	4.0	19.0	23.0
I am not comfortable writing; I'd rather just have exams.	6.0	16.1	22.1
I expect all the information I need to know for my coursework (assignments, papers, exams) to be covered in class and not require out-of-class work.	3.5	18.2	21.7
In each class, I want to know specifically why I should learn.	8.0	28.1	36.1
I am generally reluctant to speak up when we have class activities.	6.6	31.3	37.9
I am comfortable talking with instructors about topics other than class.	7.5	31.7	39.2
I would like to be able to talk with my instructors about topics other than class	10.4	38.8	49.2

**Table 7.** Percentage of responses strongly agreeing or agreeing to items addressing student expectations of classroom and teacher interaction

Both Millennial students and their parents have been characterized as consumers. While responses of this sample to items about their objective for being at college confirm an orientation around preparation for jobs, some focus group members acknowledged other motivations. Addressing other approaches, after others identified getting marketable skills and getting jobs as their motivators, one focus group participant said his motivation was, "meeting new people," and another simply said, "freedom."

Item	% strongly agreeing	% agreeing	Total % in agreement
My most important objective at college is getting a degree so I can find a job.	35.8	45.3	81.1
My most important objective at college is getting good grades.	27.0	51.0	78.0
My most important objective at college is having a good time.	2.5	18.5	21.0

**Table 8.** Percentage of responses strongly agreeing or agreeing to items identifying student objectives for being at university.

Finally, in response to item asking "Realistically, how much do you expect to study per day for all your classes," 49.2% responded 2-3 hours, and 28.6% responded 1-2 hours. Fifty-five percent agreed or strongly agreed that they would study more if they had the time.

## Discussion

In this discussion, after summarizing how the data address the first three research questions, I address the final research question: What does this tell me about how I might respond to the expectations that students in this sample report?

The degree of similarity of responses of this group of students in my large Midwestern university to items associated with claims (Alsop, 2008; Howe & Strauss, 2000; Rampell, 2011; Shimabukuro, 2011) made about their generation, the Millennials, was mixed. Consistent with characterizations of Millennials, their responses reflect a desire for attention and support from faculty and for very clearly-enunciated classroom instructions, expectations, and rules. However, their responses were not consistent with claims that Millennials are focused on or favor group interaction, at least in response to the items in the survey about group work in class. Their responses also were not consistent with the claims that Millennials are tech-savvy and desire extensive integration of digital technology into the classroom. Data from the survey supports the argument that these students believe their parents have high expectations of them. Discussion in the focus group suggests this both creates pressure for performance at school and is perceived as a form of parental support, which is consistent with characterizations of Millennials.

These differences between claims about the Millennial Generation and this particular group of students are unsurprising. As some observers have noted (Bonner et al., 2011; Oblinger & Hawkins, 2005; Reuman, 2011), generalizing about 15.6 million undergraduates is dangerous and definitionally erroneous. Some of the factors that might contribute to the differences found between this study and popular characterizations revolve around the demographics of these students and of Millennials on whom the claims were based. Although about 75% of the students on my campus as reported for FY 2012 are white, and the average age of undergraduates is 21.2, both somewhat consistent with Howe and Strauss's (2000) original sample, only some of the students at my university are affluent, from highly educated professional families or suburban. Quite a few are from small rural towns and blue-collar families; 9.9% of the students who responded to my survey reported they were the first person in their families to go to college.

Familiarity with technology and an expectation that it is available in the classroom context also may influence student responses. Distance education is only beginning to be an acceptable form of course delivery in my university, and we have struggled to get funding to keep basic classroom technology updated, so students are not used to having sophisticated technology in most of our classrooms. Despite heroic efforts by the university to upgrade technology, we must move computers on carts from room to room in some buildings. Although some faculty at my university have successfully implemented a variety of innovative classroom technologies, this is relatively rare overall and specifically so in my department and its building. Therefore, our students have relatively few reference points to imagine really extensive use of video, games, and interactive response systems.

Responses of these students were inconsistent in terms of their expectations of teachers and of the educational experience. An important case in point is group work. Although, as noted, Millennials are said to be team-oriented, students responding to this survey were not enthusiastic about doing class work in groups. Although they appreciated hearing others' ideas, focus group comments suggest this may reflect an interest in having key ideas reiterated or discovering what they had missed in their own thinking. This group certainly did not indicate a preference for group work over other activities.

Other key take-away ideas for me from the study are student responses about a fairly narrow focus on grades, and especially test grades, and less interest in feedback, despite their evidenced interest in knowing in detail what is expected. It would be interesting to explore the extent to which this may reflect face threats to their sense of being deserving of praise and positive results. The finding that nearly 40% of respondents agreed with the item "I am generally reluctant to speak up when we have class activities" is of concern. It is consistent with my own experience and spurs me to find ways to enhance safe collective exploration of ideas in my classroom.

Finally, results demonstrate that holding student attention remains a significant challenge. Although fewer than 30% of respondents to the survey agreed that they had trouble staying awake and paying attention in class, that's still a considerable group. Unhappily, the survey items to which they responded about attention were not very nuanced, and social desirability bias may have played a large role in student response.

*Reflections and my answer to Research Question 4.* Propositions for change in teaching strategies are frequently grounded in the argument that Millennials are different in significant ways from other generations. Therefore to meet their learning needs, it is argued, teachers must change their pedagogical approaches and implement heightened personal connections with students, enhanced use of digital and other media, eliminating or nearly eliminating lecture in favor of discussion, group work, and experiences. This study, especially my exploration of the literature, confirms for me that these are good ideas. For any generation. The issues are degree and how change is anchored.

I take away from this study that we must make even stronger connections of ideas to how the ideas we teach work in the world, balancing concern with conveying concepts and "covering the material" with helping students develop ways of thinking that will support them both short-term and in life-long growth. When media are useful to illustrate ideas, I will seek to use them. I think there is room for more of this, and as available technology in the classroom supports it, this could be an engaging addition. Where experiences outside the classroom are an appropriate way to bring ideas to life, I will seek to use them. In fact, one of my favorite approaches to connecting organizational communication ideas with students' own lives is an assignment to interview a parent about his or her work.

This study also has encouraged me to focus further on clearer articulation of processes students must use to succeed, in tasks ranging from how to read for sense, how to articulate thoughts in written form, how to seek information effectively and responsibly. This study confirms my suspicion that I tend to assume they are more like others (students who were students when I was, graduate students today, faculty, me) than they are and that they are more prepared and experienced in this work of learning than they are. Their responses in this study demonstrate the extent of difference between my assumptions and theirs.



Even having identified these basic objectives, I come away from this process without a specific plan about whether to show a YouTube or play contemporary music every day or whether to plan on 50% discussion each class period or incorporate online games and puzzles. My plan at this point is to begin by going back to basics. I will revisit *Understanding by Design* (McTighe & Wiggins, 2005) and think more and harder about learning objectives and about my students. I know a bit more about them now, and this will guide me as I discover which new teaching strategies to incorporate specifically to address those objectives and support my students' learning.

*Limitations.* Although this study did not set out to establish statistical relationships or even to generalize beyond the group, I acknowledge its limitations. The biggest of these revolves around the survey items. This was the first test for these items, and some, in retrospect, are ambiguous. Given when I have learned from this project, in additional investigation, I will seek to frame items that gather more fine-grained and nuanced information, particularly in terms of student expectations of the learning experience. Open-ended questions in a revised survey and interviews also would provide more detailed data and, I hope, more guidance as I continue to think hard and creatively about how I can support learning in this group of students.

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